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# **The Nwagu Aneke Igbo Script: Its Origins, Features and Potentials as a Medium of Alternative Literacy in African Languages<sup>1</sup>**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

Since the middle of the 19th century, there have been numerous reports of the creation or, more probably, the (re)-discovery of various types of indigenous writing in some parts of West Africa by men commonly regarded as illiterate in the post-colonial situation in which literacy is measured exclusively in terms of proficiency in either the Arabic or the Roman script—the two systems of writing imposed on Africa through colonialism.<sup>2</sup> This extremely narrow colonialist yardstick further limits the conditions of literacy by insisting on defining it in terms of ability to read and write the colonial languages. Thus, even today, in many African countries, millions of ordinary rural and urban folk who can read and write their own indigenous languages, in the Roman and Arabic scripts, are not officially reckoned as literate in statistics published by various national governments and international organizations such as the UNESCO. In general, the various forms of indigenous writing noticed so far in West Africa, seem to have (re-)emerged as modes of ultra-nationalist reaction against the dominance of the colonial scripts and languages and what their purveyors see as the alien and alienating systems of knowledge transmitted through them into the African mind. Invariably claiming supernatural inspiration, the chief exponents of each script is reported as setting out, not to complete the tripod of what Ali Mazrui (1986) calls the "triple heritage" of indigenous, Arabic and Western cultural values in Africa, but to assert the autonomy, purity, strength and superiority of traditional African values against the claims of the values arising from the colonial experience.

The present paper is a study of the origins, features and significance of one of the thirty or so indigenous systems of writing which (re-)emerged during the colonial period as a medium for challenging alien cultural values and for the re-assertion of the superiority of African spiritual and moral traditions and of the thought-patterns which lie behind them. I have in earlier papers focused attention almost exclusively on these radically revisionist views of the allegedly damaging legacy of colonialism purveyed through this remarkable script and its literature by the

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1. This paper was originally delivered as a lecture at the Literacy Speaker Series of the National Center for Adult Literacy/The Literacy Research Center, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, May 13, 1992, and at the Adult Literacy Training Workshop, also organized by the National Center for Adult Literacy Center, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, June 15-26, 1992. It was subsequently presented at the Healey Library, University of Massachusetts at Boston, under the auspices of the William Monroe Trotter Institute Forum Series 1992/1993, on Wednesday, December 9, 1992. A revised version was also presented and enthusiastically discussed at the Xth Annual Conference on African Linguistics at the Ohio State University, Columbus, OH. The present version benefits from the critical comments and suggestions received from professional colleagues at the above presentations.

2. See: Wilson and Wynkoop, 1834; Koelle, 1849

man who claimed to have invented it—a one-time prosperous land-owner and diviner, the late Ogbuevi Nwagu Aneke of the village of Umuleri in the Anambra Local Government Area of Anambra State of South-Eastern Nigeria. The present paper will focus on the mechanics of the script itself, and I shall be reflecting at large on one of the numerous potential values of studying it, namely the possibilities and problems of developing it as a medium for alternative literacy in African languages. I shall be reflecting on these matters as the Director of a project—the Nwagu Aneke Research Project<sup>3</sup>—which is committed to documenting and studying the Nwagu Aneke script from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives—linguistic, literary, historiographic, philosophical, educational, and so forth. I speak both for myself and for other members of the Nwagu Aneke Research team on the main directions of our research and my purpose is to try as best as I can to elicit wider scholarly discourse on the script.

The challenge of developing the script as a medium of "alternative literacy" figures prominently in the statement of the objectives of our research team. But what do we mean by "alternative literacy"? For us, "alternative literacy", by analogy to "alternative medicine", refers to all activities and processes of reading and writing which can profitably exist in complementary relationship with the official literacy media in a given social environment. Also, by analogy to alternative medicine, such activities and processes of reading and writing deserve official recognition and promotion if and where it is clearly demonstrable that they can reach the masses, especially at the rural grassroots, with relatively greater ease than the mainline systems. The question before us in this presentation is: Can the Nwagu Aneke script function effectively as such an alternative medium of literacy not only in Igbo, its base language, but in a wider range of indigenous African languages, especially those in the Niger-Congo family?

### **The Origins of the Nwagu Aneke Script**

On the eve of Nigeria's independence in 1960, Ogbuevi Nwagu Aneke, who was well-known in his village as an unlettered but highly successful land owner and diviner (*dibia afa*) suddenly announced to his bewildered and amused townsmen that he had been taught how to read and write by spirits (*ndi mmuo*). Like Coleridge's ancient mariner, he carried the story of his transformation from stark illiteracy to literacy to anyone who cared to listen. A few were impressed by the quaint characters which he poured out daily on cheap exercise books and called it an "Igbo shorthand"; but, as the great majority of his kinsmen watched him neglect his rights, privileges and responsibilities as a titled medicine man and head of his extended family, succumbing to poverty as he ignored the seizure of his property by land-grabbing neighbors while he devoted hours on end everyday writing, they concluded that he had either run stark mad or turned into a capricious fool. But Nwagu Aneke persisted in his story of spiritual revelation and the burden of a message for the salvation of the black man which the spirits had placed upon his head.

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3. The project, which was initiated by the late Professor Donatus Nwoga at the Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka (Nwagu Aneke Research Project, 1990), is currently relocated in the Department of Africana Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, USA

Now, this is his story. One night, when he went to bed, he was visited by strange beings who he later identified, as they persisted in visiting him night after night, as the spirits of his ancestors. According to Nwagu Aneke, these spirits asked him to go to the shrine of the earth goddess, *Ajaana*, at the holy village of Nneyi to perform certain rites of purification in view of the filthy life he had lead in the past, for he had been selected for a great mission on earth. One market week (*izu*) after this purification, the spirits returned. According to Nwagu Aneke, in one of his early books, dating back to the early nineteen-sixties:

[The spirits] told me that I would acquire the knowledge of reading and writing. They said that the work I had to do in the world were enormous, that the actions I would have to perform in the world were extensive. They said that it was not work that could be done from the memory that I had come to do, that the messages I had to deliver were not messages that could be carried fully in the memory, that the actions I had to take were not actions that could be borne in memory, otherwise, the people who now live on earth would say that I had run mad. So, it was necessary that I should obtain the knowledge of reading and writing.

Ironically, the eventual sudden acquisition of the knowledge of reading and writing, which purportedly followed this spiritual revelation, turned Nwagu Aneke into a lunatic in the eyes of his people. Struck down, as he says, by *Agwu*, the Igbo god of madness and creativity, he roamed the forests like a wild animal, for weeks on end, gathering the leaves of trees. According to him, the leaves even spoke to him as he approached them, like objects in *Alice in Wonderland*, urging him to pluck them, and as he despaired, a certain bird was quick at hand to spur him on, crowing like a cock:

*Gbadokwa ume ooooo!*

*Gbadokwa ume ooooo!*

[Hold up your breath ooooo!

Hold up your breath ooooo!]

On returning home with sacks of the leaves of the trees, he claims that, as he copied the marks on leaf after leaf, spurred on by the spirits, each mark became associated with a distinctive sound, each of which, within the analytical framework of modern linguistics, can be said to represent a syllable. In this way, claims Nwagu Aneke, he succeeded, after some years of continuous and excruciating labor, in developing a complete syllabary for the writing of his native Umuleri dialect of Igbo, without ever stepping into a classroom. This syllabary is contained in the chart and the alphabetical list of characters presented in Appendix I and II respectively.

Needless to say, Nwagu Aneke's story has a familiar ring with echoes in many situations associated especially with the birth of religion across the world and across the centuries. We are reminded in particular of Prophet Mohammed and his message of Islam. Like the message of Islam, the message of Nwagu Aneke is a radical restatement of traditional values against what the inspired receptor of supernatural revelation regards as alien and alienating orthodoxy. In the 100 or so extant exercise books filled with his messages, Nwagu Aneke restates the vitality of a

triad of God, elemental deities and spirits who govern the world and control the interaction that should exist between human beings and these forces as well as other human beings and other creations against what he sees as the antithetical religion of Christianity and the spiritual nullity of Western civilization. These forcefully rendered arguments for a radical return to the roots of a truly indigenous African system of values and thought-patterns run through Nwagu Aneke's daily diaries, his comments on the events of the day and his other writings. These are currently being transcribed into the Roman alphabet, translated and edited by members of the Nwagu Aneke Research Team for critical study as literature, philosophy and social commentary.

Let us now proceed to the issue at hand - the features of the script itself and its potentials as a medium of alternative literacy in indigenous African languages. We need no apologia for this exercise. The script exists, and unlike the systems which have established themselves in Africa as legacies of Arab and European colonialism, it is a local manifestation of a wider West Africa phenomenon which has grown out of purely indigenous resources. If we must be as circumspect as we should be in planning mass literacy programs for Africa, indigenous resources of this kind need to be thoroughly examined for any alternative insights which they may provide, for what Nwagu Aneke describes as visitation by spirit beings may be nothing other than an expression, in terms of the traditional Igbo world view, of what in the rational philosophy of the West would simply be described as either pure inspiration or the fetishization of the power of reading and writing.

### **The Features of the Nwagu Aneke Script**

As should be clear by now, the Nwagu Aneke script is essentially a syllabic form of writing. It belongs to the phase in the evolution of writing systems at which various conventional characters are used to represent the syllables of a language (see Appendix 1 for the syllabary of the Nwagu Aneke script). However, as in all writing systems, including the Roman and Arabic scripts, a few logographs (characters representing complete words or morphemes) subsist in the system. These logographs which are contained in the box in Appendix I, may well be of some special interest in view of the world view and philosophy promoted through the medium of the script; but we are yet to fully understand their significance.

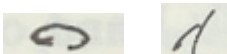
Respectively preceding and following the syllabic phase in the evolution of writing systems are the pictographic and ideographic phases, on the one hand, and the phonetic or alphabetic phase, on the other hand, the latter being the phase to which alphabets of the kind found in the Arabic and the Roman scripts belong. All these phases, which are not necessarily in strict chronological-evolutionary sequence, have manifested themselves in various parts of West Africa where more than thirty different types of indigenous writing systems are known to exist, and the Nwagu Aneke system is clearly part of this wider West African phenomenon.

Pictographic writing seems to have evolved from the rock art and symbolic markings on surfaces and bodies by early man. It is a form of writing in which man made use of simple pictures to represent his experiences. Thus, for example, a stylized picture of the sun [ O ] would be understood as representing the sun while such a picture of a person [ ^ ] would be understood as representing a man or a woman. A string of such pictures could be used to tell a story as in many early scripts. There are traces of picture-writing in *Nsibidi*—the writing system employed


by the Igbo, Ibibio, Efik and Ekoi peoples of the Cross River Area of south-eastern Nigeria in pre-colonial times for various documentary, cultic, erotic and other expressive purposes (see Maxwell, 1905; MacGreggor, 1909; Dayrell, 1910 and 1911; Talbot, 1912; Jeffreys, 1934; and Kalu, 1982). *Nsibidi* is however not exclusively pictographic. It contains elements of the ideographic system of writing, showing that it probably belongs to the transitional stage between pictographic and ideographic writing. Thus, in *Nsibidi*, while the stylized characters [ ] and [ ] are used pictographically in isolation to represent man and woman respectively, they are also used ideographically, in various combinations, to represent various ideas connected with man-woman relationships. For example, the figure of a man and a woman backing one another with a line (pillow?) between them [ ] represents a quarrel between husband and wife while marital love is represented by the figure of a man and a woman locked into one another [ ]. Such ideas can be intensified by the addition of one or more strokes. For example, violent marital discord is indicated by strokes suggestive of sparks of fire from the discord, thus:

In a few characters, such as the one for a prostitute [ ], we can see a clear link between pictographic and ideographic representation. The wide open legs of the whore is unmistakable in this strikingly pictographic ideograph. The provenance of such ideographs may be traced back to age-old decorative and symbolic markings on human bodies such as the Igbo *uli* (see Willis, 1987) and mnemonic markings on other objects and surfaces such as the yam-marks of the Western Igbo (see Thomas, 1913, III:183). Other possible sources are the more elaborate forms of graphic symbolism associated with magical and religious rituals in most West African societies which have been discussed in some detail in Dalby (1968).

The Nwagu Aneke script has been erroneously described by the Nigerian press as *Nsibidi*, and Nwagu Aneke himself tended to accept this erroneous description in one of his books entitled *The Spirits Implore Me to Record All They Have Taught Me* (D13); but, as has been noted above, the script belongs to a different system and phase in the evolution of writing. It is syllabic, with the basic CV syllables of Nwagu Aneke's Umuleri dialect of Igbo represented by the characters presented in Appendix I. But this syllabary, like the syllabary of ancient Hebrew and many other ancient scripts, does not have characters for vowels *per se*. Consequently, it does not have any place for V syllables. This means that a number of words in the language which contain syllabic vowels cannot be fully represented in the script. For example, the common name, *Obioma* [O-bi-o-ma] which contains two V syllable [O] and [o] can only be realized in the script as *bi-ma*, thus:

  
O bi o ma

A new initiate into the script can therefore only read words of this kind by recall or in context (see Azuonye, forthcoming). Because of this deficiency, a number of characters are used somewhat logographically to represent many different words in different contexts. Thus, the character [ ], *bi*, will not only represent the word *O-bi*, as in the above example, but also *u-bi* (farm), *i-bi* (scrotal elephantiasis) and *e-bi* (porcupine), depending on the context. Similarly,

the character [  ], *ma*, will represent, in addition to *o-ma* (beautiful; good), such other words as *a-ma* (village-square), *u-ma* (character), and the like. The Maseorites solved this kind of problem in the ancient Hebrew script in which YAHWEH, for example, was originally written as YHWH without vowels, by creating a system of vowel characters for the script. The Nwagu Aneke script is yet to be subjected to such a complementation.

However, neither Nwagu Aneke nor any of the other exponents of indigenous writing in West Africa regards such complementation a necessary refinement. Before his tragic death in an automobile accident on June 2, 1991, Nwagu Aneke had been engaged for about three years as a Writer-in-Residence in the Division of General Studies at the University of Nigeria, but he spent his time writing the numerous messages from the spirits rather than pay attention to such a purely mechanical matter although his attention was drawn to it from time to time. Oblivious of any deficiencies in the systems believed to have been received directly from God through the instrumentality of the ancestral spirits, Nwagu Aneke and his counterparts elsewhere in West Africa have been content to promote their scripts as media for alternative literacy counteracting the white man's claims to intellectual and cultural superiority by reason of the possession of the power of the written word capable of transmitting messages across time and space and providing the graphic infrastructure for technological development. Thus, as in the case of the Vai script of Liberia (see Wilson and Wynkoop, 1834; Koelle, 1849; and Hair, 1963), Nwagu Aneke claims in his books that the gift of writing from the spirits is proof not only that the black man has the same technological ability as the white man but that he will take over from where the white man, will sooner than later be forced to give way (F24: *I Went Round the World*).

### **The Potentials of the Script as a Medium of Alternative Literacy**

As I have pointed out, the wider implications of the propagation of indigenous writing as a medium for alternative literacy in West Africa constitute one of the key concerns of the Nwagu Aneke Research Project (1990: 7-8). Many of these concerns are purely psychological. But our main concern is with the prospects of establishing more practical uses of script in contemporary social communication.

Basically psychological is the exciting idea of "a script of our own" which must be used, even against the odds as an expression of cultural independence. In the 19th century, this kind of cultural nationalist attitude seems to have strongly influenced the great popularity enjoyed by the Vai script among the rural population of the Liberian hinterland. As "a script of our own", the Vai script served effectively as a medium of indigenous nationalist reaction against the growing dominance of Americo-Liberian elements in the national life of what was then a new African republic. Everywhere in the countryside, outside Freetown, the true indigenes (tailors, foremen, laborers, housewives, market-women, etc) spurned English and the Roman script and insisted on acquiring literacy in their own script, the Vai script, which they called to use in all transactions of everyday life - fabric measurement, recording lists of workers and their wages, market lists, and for personal correspondence and the keeping of family and private personal records (See Koelle (1849). This trend has continued to a large degree till today with very startling results for alternative adult literacy in rural Liberia. Thus, Carraher (1987: 103) observes, quoting statistical

evidence from Scribner and Cole (1978), that, as recently as the middle of the 1980's and "Despite competition with English and Arabic, 20-25% of adult males were literate in Vai, although Vai script was taught outside of formal schooling." Carraher's explanation for this phenomenon is that "Since Vai literacy is acquired under informal conditions of instruction, it is most likely that what favors the acquisition of Vai literacy is the meaning it has for those who learn it." Apart from the use of the script to protect business and personal records from the outsider, including the government (which is still regarded in most African countries as inimical to the interests of the individual), "the meaning" which Vai literacy holds for rural Liberians is purely cultural nationalistic. Thus, as Ofri-Scheps (1990: 36) observes,

the indigenous population is disinclined to acquire literacy in an African language by means of a non-endogenously developed writing, e.g. using the Roman or Arabic alphabets (Emphasis added).

Such a cultural nationalist impulse may well lie behind the much-vaunted secrecy of the use of the older pictographic-ideographic system, *Nsibidi*, in south-eastern Nigeria where, as the literature repeatedly tells us, there was always a great deal of reluctance on the part of its purveyors to admit the white man into the secrets of its codes (see MacGreggor, 1909; Talbot, 1912; and Dayrell, 1910 and 1911).

But beyond these cultural nationalist arguments, lie a number of practical and pedagogical questions regarding the value of the indigenous scripts as a media for alternative literacy in African Languages, and these constitute the central concern in this paper.

As a syllabary, the Nwagu Aneke script, as we have noted, occupies a stage in the evolution of writing traditionally located by linguists "between phoneticized pictographic and alphabetic systems". Part of the rationale for setting up the Nwagu Aneke Research Project is the assumption that, "the more we understand the provenance, nature and other aspects of the script, the more we can understand certain aspects of the evolution of writing systems on which there is doubt, debate or paucity of evidence." Working, as have done until his death in 1991, with a living innovator of this type of script, we have been able to amass valuable textual and autobiographical data that must be of value to future students of the phenomenon of writing. In addition, as we have argued in our research project proposal, "the Nwagu Aneke script promises to contribute excellent data for the study of the rudiments of visual communication and for the investigation of certain aspects of the interface between literacy and orality". Such a study could be highly useful in planning adult literacy programs, especially in view of Nwagu Aneke's sudden and traumatic transformation from the oral-aural to the visual-graphic mode of communication.

If there are any doubts about the serious attention which our team is giving to the Nwagu Aneke phenomenon, it seems necessary to face the question of Nwagu Aneke's choice of the syllabic medium rather than the well-established alphabetic medium actively in use in schools, churches, offices, business establishments and elsewhere all around him. Why would the powerful voices or impulses from the past direct him, not toward the imitation of this actively present graphic medium but to something different and apparently distant? Are we faced here



with a case of sheer atavism? Or are we beholden to a form of nativism which seems to say: "If they have their own script, we must have ours". Or is there something fundamentally different in the structure of African and related languages which calls for a form of graphic representation which the Roman script is inadequate to offer?

In our proposal, we have hypothesized this vital difference and the relativism which naturally goes with it. It seems to us that the Nwagu Aneke and similar scripts do indeed represent effective counters to "the assumption that alphabetic scripts are based on the most sophisticated and accurate analysis of language structure as compared with 'earlier' writing systems". In this regard, the agenda we have set for ourselves in the study of the script includes two broad fields of investigations: "Firstly, an investigation of the status of the script as a syllabary examining such issues as: the relations or interconnections of the script with other extant syllabaries; the grammatical features of the script with regard to its fidelity to the grammatical rules of Igbo and the internal consistency of the script with regard to the correspondence between its graphic symbols and the grammatical forms they are intended to represent. Secondly, the implications of the adoption of the script for language planning and other forms of social engineering would be considered". It is in the later field that we locate the alternative literacy option.

Our starting point in pursuing the alternative literacy option is the hypothesis which is currently beginning to be widely accepted in the scholarship of literacy that unlettered adults find it easier to acquire literacy through a syllabary than through an alphabet. Stubbs (1980: 80) invokes this hypothesis in his study of the conflict between Eskimo literacy in the Eskimo syllabary introduced in 1878 and in the Roman script introduced much later in 1953 and notes that the "syllabary is...easier to learn" on the linguistic grounds that, for literacy purposes, "a syllabary is preferable for those languages with a suitable phonological structure." But this fact notwithstanding, literacy in the Eskimo syllabary is rapidly declining. Stubbs (1980: 82-82) explains that, pandering to international politics of literacy which uses economic and questionable cultural arguments to exclude alternative to total world domination by entrenched Western systems, that,

although a syllabary is arguably efficient on linguistic and pedagogical grounds, and is widely used and accepted by the Eskimo, it is clearly at odds with the broader socio-economic needs of the Eskimo's place in Canadian society... the use of a Roman alphabet will facilitate their learning to read and write English (or French) and ultimately make it easier for them to find jobs in Canada and the USA. Thus the short-term educational needs of the individual are in conflict with the long-term economic and cultural needs of the individual and the social group. This type of conflict is always most clear-cut when it is between the language system of a small group and an international language such as English.

The political and neo-colonialist tone of this apologia is unmistakable, especially when put side by side with another argument justifying the continued use of a syllabary in Japan, an argument which can also be made for Eskimo and many African languages. According to Stubbs (1980: 4):

In a syllabary, there is ideally one symbol for each syllable. Japanese uses two syllabaries, alongside other writing systems, with less than fifty symbols. The phonological structures of

Japanese is ideal for such a system since the syllabic structure is very simple. Syllables in Japanese have the structure (C)V(N), that is, a vowel preceded optionally by a consonant and followed by a nasal /m/, /n/, or /ŋ/, depending on the following sound. No other possibilities exist, and therefore Japanese has a very small number of possible syllabic type. A syllabary would on the other hand be very uneconomical in English, which allows so many other possibilities of syllable type that a syllabary would require hundreds of signs. In modern English, there are no syllabic signs in normal use.

If there are economic and neo-colonialist arguments for the continued use of the Roman script for the teaching of African languages, as in the case of Eskimo, the linguistic-structural arguments, illustrated by the example of Japanese, seems to suggest the opposite. The syllabic structure of many African languages are even simpler than that of Japanese, and there is no reason why the existing African syllabaries, such as the Nwagu Aneke syllabary, cannot be rationalized for literacy purposes into systems with fewer characters or symbols than they contain in their present crude forms. It is not expected that the syllabaries would displace the official Roman and Arabic scripts inherited from the colonial powers. It is difficult to see how African governments, which hang tenaciously to their colonial boundaries, can give up such precious legacies of colonialism. It is however hoped that, recognizing and capitalizing on their pedagogical efficiency, the indigenous scripts can be promoted as media for alternative functional literacy at the grassroots. The Nwagu Aneke Research Project (1990: 7-8) is interested in exploring such possibilities. Confirming the existing pedagogical hypothesis just reviewed, a pilot sampling of unlettered Igbo villagers in the Nsukka area by the late Professor Donatus Nwoga, originator and first Director of the project, suggests that when presented with visual information in the Roman and the Nwagu Aneke scripts, the stark illiterate found it much easier to associate sound with graphic forms in the syllabic system than in the alphabetic system. Indeed, the "syllable hypothesis" in child language learning (Olson, Torrance and Hildyard, 1985: 224-226), whereby the child unscrambles names and counts the syllables as a basis for learning, suggests that the syllabary is probably by far the most natural medium of literacy, and this is probably so because, as Plato says through Socrates in *Theaetetus* (202-202; quoted in Goody and Watt, 1975: 54), "the elements or letters are only objects of perception, and cannot be defined or known; but the syllables or combinations of them are known and... apprehended". Nevertheless, it is our contention in the Nwagu Aneke Research Team that these possibilities still need to be subjected to further rigorous and systematic experimental verification in the field. If such systematic field verification confirm our sample observations not only for Igbo but for other African languages, the development of the script for the purposes of adult literacy programs ought to be pursued with utmost vigor, and this will involve finding solutions to some of the limitations of the script for such purposes, notably the absence of vowels, diacritical marks, punctuation marks and boundaries of words, sentences and larger syntagmatic units and the multiple value of certain characters. But we have the experience of the development of similar effects in many other scripts to draw from. And the example of Ofri-Scheps with the Vai script (1990: 36) suggests the viability of involving systems engineers in creating or adapting suitable software for the script to facilitate the production of reading material in it.

It may be argued that the development of alternative literacy in what many would regard as a quaint indigenous script cannot be of any real value other than as an expression of nativistic romanticism or the fetishization of writing. Furthermore, it may be argued that there is no need to complicate further the literacy problem in Africa by the introduction of a second-tier when efforts should be devoted to making the various scripts already in use and enjoying official patronage to reach the grassroots. But, such an argument can also easily be extended to the official recognition accorded alternative or traditional medicine by national governments and international organizations such as the World Health Organization. The development of alternative literacy in a script that is confirmed through empirical research to be more easily accessible to the generality of the illiterate masses need not be seen as either obstructive or destructive since such a second-tier of literacy exists in some other countries and does indeed exist in parts of Africa like in Northern Nigeria, where the *Ajami* script provides alternative literacy in Hausa, Fulfulde, Kanuri and some minority languages of that highly Islamicized region. The kind of alternative literacy which can be developed in the Nwagu Aneke system can be effectively exploited in devising communicative strategies for reaching the rural masses with vital health care messages, agricultural extension information, environmental protection briefs and other kinds of information about social policy designed for them but which have hardly been successfully transmitted to them through the Roman script over the decades. Clearly an alternative medium seems called for.

But, apart from the purely pedagogic and mass communicative aspects of alternative literacy is the possibility of developing the script as a form of shorthand for African languages, especially in view of the fact that Pitman's shorthand which is currently in vogue in West Africa was developed on the phonological system of English and has no provision for a number of sound patterns common to many African languages, especially implosives like \kp\, \kw\, \gb\, \gw\, \ny\, \nw\, etc. We are informed by Mr Loveday Umezurike, Secretary to the Director of the Division of General Studies at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and a stenographer attached to the Nwagu Aneke Research Project, that, from his knowledge of the Pitman's system, while it is founded on the same syllabic principles as the Nwagu Aneke script, the Nwagu Aneke system has the advantage of dual advantage of being shorter and covering sounds and sound-patterns in Igbo which he always wrote in long hand while taking notes in short hand. He however noted that the script is yet to develop a cursive style to enhance the speed of taking notes in it. If these claims are verified, the development of a cursive style in the script will take the course of such development in other scripts, including the far more cumbersome far eastern scripts.

The cultural nationalist implications of these and other practical possibilities seem plain enough. Like the other indigenous scripts of West Africa, the Nwagu Aneke script is not just the creation of its inspired originator or purveyor in reaction against the dominance of alien mentifacts imposed by colonialism; it is, more significantly, probably a rediscovery and reactivation of a mode of expression which has been developed without external stimulus in a traditional African culture and which seems to possess the potential of serving the present as effectively as the forms borrowed from alien sources. But even where their continued use in the present cultural situation cannot be assured, the knowledge of their existence seems to be a

crucial part of the cultural nationalist assertion of a past with parallel intellectual attainments as those of the colonizer.

### Summary and Conclusions

This paper has examined the origins and aspects of the design and message of the Nwagu Aneke Igbo Syllabary, one of the major forms of indigenous writing that have (re)-emerged in West Africa since colonial times. Both the script and the message which it communicates have been shown to be deeply committed and powerful expressions of cultural nationalism which strike at the very roots of colonial mentality: spiritual and intellectual servitude. The mission of the script and its message is clear: to dismantle all alien and alienating structures superimposed on vital African cultural institutions and values by the colonial experience. The texts call for a radical return to these African cultural institutions and values, holding them up as superior to, and more suited to the African environment than values from the intellectual traditions inherited from the colonial powers. Apocalyptic, poetic, revolutionary and generally philosophical, the protests cover all aspects of post-colonial life which have been re-directed from the ancestral path by the colonial experience.

The ancestral message of the Nwagu Aneke and other indigenous scripts is probably belated. The ideas they question seem so deeply entrenched that only a grassroots, pan-African revolution (probably an impossible proposition in the contemporary African situation) can bring about the kind of change they envision. Nevertheless, the message is clearly important as part of the ongoing crusade for setting off evolutionary processes toward the decolonization of the African mind. And to this enterprise, Nwagu Aneke brings a home-bred intellect, imagination and honesty which western-educated crusaders in the same field, like Chinweizu, et al (1983) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986), will be hard put to match.

The use of an indigenous script features frequently as part of the mission of prophets of new national religions or ideologies. Nwagu Aneke uses the script to draw attention to his mission, which he sees as the enormous task of revealing the rich spiritual, moral and intellectual resources of a pre-colonial African civilization which he considers as one of the greatest in the world. The triad of God, spirits and the elemental deities is central to that civilization and is promoted as superior to all imported faiths. The intellectual resources of that civilization have created a political system based on natural rulership which is far more conducive for peace and progress than the divisive and corrupt system inherited from the colonial powers. Nwagu Aneke sees his writings as the bridge between the chaotic present and that lost civilization.

Studies of literature in the indigenous scripts of West Africa are few and far between. Most of the existing studies focus on the *Book of Rora* in the Vai Script (see Hair, 1963: 48-49; Holsoe, 1976, and Ofri-Scheps, 1990). Despite references to the large quantity of writings in by King Njoya of the Foubam kingdom in Cameroon in the Bamum script (Crawford, 1935: 438; Dugast and Jeffreys, 1950; and Schmitt, 1963), there are no extant studies of these writings. The reason for the paucity of such studies is probably the inaccessibility or scarcity of literary materials in the great majority of the indigenous scripts. The Nwagu Aneke Igbo script is refreshingly different. For over thirty years, from the late 1950's to his death in June 1991, Nwagu Aneke wrote persistently in the script and left behind over 100 exercise book filled with his vibrant anti-

colonial messages. With the forthcoming publication of Nwoga's edition of his scriptures and with the publication of editions of other "books" produced before and during his tenure as Writer-in-Residence at the University of Nigeria, literature in the indigenous script of West Africa will no doubt be given more serious attention than they now command, not as cultural curios or merely as data for reconstructing aspects of the story of the evolution of writing systems, but as works of art and as expressions of the personal philosophies of their authors and of the world views and ideologies of the traditional societies and the larger African world to which they belong. The Nwagu Aneke corpus will no doubt occupy a central place in such a re-ordering of values. But, on a more practical note, as I have been arguing in this paper, it is hoped that it will provide a practical medium for alternative literacy in African languages, in "a script of our own" which will assure its own continuity and the continuity of its message. The members of the Nwagu Aneke Research Project Team are ready at hand to participate in any wider project through which these objectives can be realized. Efforts to persuade the government and institutions in Nigeria to acquire the 100 extant manuscripts in the script have been frustrated owing to the apparent failure of the authorities to perceive their long-term value for black culture and history. The amount of money required for this acquisition is rather small at the moment, but as the years go by, we stand the risk of losing the manuscripts altogether or having to acquire them (but even then, possibly only fragments of them) at a much more exorbitant price. In the circumstances, the Nwagu Aneke Research Team stands ready to explore new avenues of support in its efforts to establish the texts in the script as an important corpus for Africana studies.

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**Appendix 1: The Syllabary of the Nwagu Aneke Script**

(From *The Nwagu Aneke Research Project Proposal*, p. 5)

**Appendix II: Alphabetical List of Nwagu Aneke's Characters**

*(Prepared by Donatus Nwoga, 1991)*

